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Author(s): Bryan Pfaffenberger

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SRI LANKA IN 1987

Indian Intervention and Resurgence of the JVP

Bryan Pfaffenberger

Hopes for a peaceful solution to Sri Lanka's civil war rose in 1987 when, in late July, India and Sri Lanka signed an accord that brought thousands of Indian troops to the strife-torn Northern and Eastern provinces, where militant Tamil youths are fighting to establish an independent Tamil state called Tamil Eelam. Yet the signatories to the treaty, New Delhi and Colombo, failed to secure the support of the leading militant group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The consequences may prove disastrous. Within weeks of the signing, the Indian peacekeeping forces—now numbering over 20,000—found themselves in precisely the same predicament as their Sri Lankan predecessors: bogged down in a costly and bloody conflict with the LTTE, which has shown surprising strength against one of the Third World's best armies. And President J. R. Jayewardene's ruling United National Party (UNP) government, already in deep trouble with the Sinhalese masses for failing to defeat the Tamil insurgents, now faces growing antigovernment radicalism fueled by the charge that Jayewardene has gambled away Sri Lanka's sovereignty. A new Sinhalese insurgency, overtly committed to Sinhalese ethnic chauvinism and deeply antagonistic toward India, has arisen from the ashes of the ultraleftist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) to pose a very real challenge not only to the UNP, but also to the very concept of parliamentary democracy in the beleaguered country.

The Year in Review

The year began with the LTTE in what would appear to be a position of strength. Firmly in control of the Jaffna Peninsula, the Tigers had govern-

Bryan Pfaffenberger is Assistant Professor of Humanities, School of Engineering and Applied Science, University of Virginia.

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ment forces effectively bottled up in their camps and were implementing a civilian administration. The LTTE could rely on support and refuge just across the Palk Straits in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, where millions of Tamil-speaking peoples share a language and cultural tradition in common with the Tamils of northern and eastern Sri Lanka. Yet the appearance of strength was partly illusory. The Sri Lankan Tamil militants' activities in south India, which are said to have included drug trafficking, assassinations, robberies, and bombings, contributed to growing disenchantment with their cause among the Tamils in India. The LTTE's bloody campaign to exterminate rival groups, coupled with its stated goal of establishing a "one-party state on the Yugoslavian model" in Tamil Eelam, helped to further erode public support. Sensitive to this erosion (and remembering the jailing of Tamil militants during the SAARC conference in Bangalore in 1986), the LTTE appears to have made the decision to move all or most of its operations to Sri Lanka. And that decision left the LTTE open to a major offensive by Sri Lanka's security forces, which had grown in size and quality.

The offensive began on February 7, following several days of shelling and the December cutoff of kerosene, gasoline, and other essential services in the north. If public opinion among Tamils in India had soured on the militants, sympathy appears to have grown for the Sri Lankan Tamil civilian population, which found itself caught between the pincer of the government offensive and the cowardice of Tiger tactics that included the use of civilian hostages as firescreens. As civilian casualties mounted, Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi found himself under strong pressure to intervene against the offensive; indeed, Indian newspaper editorials called for an armed invasion. Gandhi chose at this point to threaten Colombo with the withdrawal of India's role as mediator unless the offensive was canceled. And so it ground to a halt.

The standoff continued through March and most of April until, late in the month, a huge bomb went off in a Colombo bus station, killing more than 100 people. The government blamed the bombing on the Tamil militants. To forestall public rioting and reprisals against Tamils living in the south, the government imposed a curfew and mounted retaliatory air strikes against rebel positions in the north. Opposition leaders in Parliament, however, bitterly accused the government of failing to protect Sinhalese lives and of coddling the Tigers. A Sinhalese youth, interviewed on a Colombo street, spoke ominously of a "final solution to the [Tamil] problem,"¹ while Buddhist monks called for President Jayewardene's res-

1. "Sri Lanka Jets Hit More Rebel Targets," *Washington Post*, April 24, 1987, p. A24.

ignation. For his part, Jayewardene warned that he might cancel the 1989 elections if the war did not end soon.

To be caught between mounting antigovernment sentiment in the south and Indian pressure against military offensives in the north is nightmare enough for a Sri Lankan leader, but evidence of yet another grave problem soon forced its way to the surface. It was evident by May that radical Sinhalese youth groups were once again prepared, as they were in 1971, to pose a challenge to the political order. Following an unusually violent spate of May Day rallies, Jayewardene warned that the JVP was planning another insurrection along the lines of the 1971 Insurgency, which took more than 10,000 lives. To be sure, Jayewardene has frequently spoken of the JVP menace to justify otherwise unpalatable policies, but subsequent security operations showed that the UNP government took the threat seriously. After a wave of student unrest, the government closed six of the country's nine universities, which are believed to be hotbeds of JVP recruitment. *Island*, a Colombo newspaper, reported that some 500 suspected JVP activists, all Sinhalese, had been detained under provisions of the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act.

Ample signs of insurgent activity in the south soon convinced even skeptical observers that the JVP threat was real. A raid on the Pallekelle army camp near Kandy netted the group some automatic weapons. Allegations that army personnel within the camp had helped the raiders led to renewed fears of JVP infiltration at virtually every level of government activity. The captured weapons appear to have been used in two daring June 7th raids, one on an air force base and the other at the Defense Academy in Colombo's suburbs. Emulating an LTTE tactic, the JVP also appears to have embarked on a program to assassinate political moderates; more than 50 local UNP activists have been slain thus far.

Originally an ultraleftist organization, the JVP appears to have made an abrupt about-face by emphasizing the politics of Sinhalese chauvinism; its posters and graffiti call the UNP attempts to negotiate with the Tigers treasonable. Such language, however, could reflect a cynical JVP strategy to destabilize the government at any cost, even inflaming ethnic animosity. Another interpretation, popular in Colombo, is that the JVP has split over the Tamil issue into two (or more) factions, one cleaving to the ultraright and the other to the extreme left. The left faction, in this view, sees the Tamil insurgency as the opening salvo in an island-wide revolution spearheaded by militant Tamil and Sinhalese youths, working *together*, to bring down parliamentary democracy in Sri Lanka, substituting in its place an ultraleftist regime that would be more responsive to the needs of youths.

The leftist interpretation should not be dismissed lightly. Penelope Willis, a journalist held captive for a month in Jaffna last year, told a London audience that the Tigers' real intentions are very different from the image of ethnic nationalism they project in their well-coordinated propaganda campaign. She discovered these intentions, she says, because the Tigers who held her decided to discuss their plans with her since they were going to kill her anyway. They told her "Tamil Eelam is not the goal of any of them . . . [and] none of the other groups was aiming for Tamil Eelam. . . . None of the Tamil groups operating were really interested in Tamil Eelam, which is nothing but a smokescreen for their real intention: to link with radical Sinhalese youth groups to establish an island-wide Marxist state with Trincomalee as its capital. . . . [Then they would] use the Island as the safe base from which to re-export the revolution into Tamil Nadu."²

Just how much credence should be given to such statements is unknown. After all, Willis *was* released. It is worth noting, however, that the leftist Eelam Revolutionary Organization (EROS), which is held responsible for the Colombo bus station bombing, has made no secret of its view that the Eelam struggle is the prelude to an island-wide Marxist revolution. To be sure, groups such as EROS are frequently said to be "radical," unlike the more "moderate" LTTE, which portrays itself as an ethnic nationalist organization fighting for the liberation of its people. (The LTTE routinely blames the more barbarous Tamil militant activities on more "radical" groups.) Significantly, however, the LTTE appears to have exempted EROS from its murderous campaign to eliminate rival militant groups, suggesting that the connection between the two (and their politics) is closer than the LTTE's propaganda would suggest. The truth is difficult to know, and in any case, the Tigers' goals may change as they grope toward a policy for the future.

Facing a JVP revolt in the south as well as the Tiger rebellion in the north, and contemplating a possible link between the two, the Colombo government decided to launch another major offensive against LTTE strongholds in late May. Employing more than 3,000 troops in a land, air, and sea assault, the government recaptured a large portion of the Jaffna Peninsula, including the home town of LTTE leader V. Prabhakaran who—as usual—escaped. Despite the failure to apprehend Prabhakaran, the Sri Lankan forces seemed to have had unprecedented success in this operation; indeed, by all accounts, they routed the Tigers.

As the offensive progressed and reports mounted of Tamil civilian casualties, Rajiv Gandhi once again found himself under increasing pressure to

2. Reprinted in "The Tamils: Recent Events in Sri Lanka," *Asian Affairs*, 18:2 (1987), pp. 178–180.

take action against Colombo. His choice this time was to dispatch a miniflotilla of fishing boats flying Red Cross flags and laden with humanitarian aid; the Sri Lankan navy, however, turned the flotilla back, claiming the supplies were not needed. Amid growing anti-Indian sentiment and rioting in Colombo, Tamil militants inflamed the situation by slaughtering 29 Buddhist monks on their way to an ordination ceremony, a move that redoubled the Sinhalese outcry against Indian intervention on the Tigers' behalf. Unable to tolerate the Sri Lankan rebuff, however, an obviously angry Gandhi sent the supplies on June 4th in five transport planes, guarded by four Mirage fighter jets, in a naked violation of Sri Lanka's airspace. The move, which pointedly demonstrated Sri Lanka's helplessness before the superior military might of its northern neighbor, was roundly condemned by all other South Asian countries.

Incensed, Jayewardene's government began what appeared to be a full-scale diplomatic protest and turned up the heat on India through its propaganda channels. It was at this juncture that the year's events took the first of three bizarre twists: Colombo suddenly withdrew its protests amid rumors of high-level, pathbreaking negotiations with New Delhi. In late July, the news was out. Rajiv Gandhi would fly to Colombo to sign a major treaty with Jayewardene that would bring thousands of Indian troops to northern and eastern Sri Lanka to guarantee the peaceful implementation of a Tamil-dominated regional government. The regional government would be based on the Provincial Councils Act, a bill still before Parliament that had been worked out in Indian-sponsored negotiations last year. Under the terms of the treaty, which was signed July 29th in Colombo, the Tamil rebels would hand over their arms to the Indian peacekeeping forces and cease all violent activities. For its part, the Colombo government would withdraw its security forces from the north and east, and it would agree to hold a referendum on the unification of the Northern and Eastern provinces, the predominantly Tamil-speaking provinces that the Tigers view as a unified Tamil homeland. Additional provisions of the pact, contained in an annexure, betrayed India's mounting displeasure with Colombo's pro-Western tilt, which had produced close relations with Washington and Karachi. The provisions insisted, for instance, that the strategically vital Eastern Province port of Trincomalee retain its "non-aligned character," a clear signal to Washington to keep its hands off the port.

The Indo-Lankan pact represented an astonishing about-face for Jayewardene—so much so, in fact, that Colombo political opinion insists that Gandhi must have given the Sri Lankan president the option of accepting the pact or facing an armed Indian invasion. For his part,

Jayewardene says that in signing the pact he acknowledged that Sri Lanka could no longer afford to ignore India's power. An additional factor doubtless was Colombo's growing disappointment that the Western powers—despite Colombo's adoption of "free market" economics and the warm welcome given to foreign investors—had failed to aid the UNP in its struggle against the Tamil militants. Whether he was forced to accept the pact or not, however, it was not without rewards for Jayewardene. With thousands of Indian troops in the north and east, and India footing the bill, the very agreeable prospect opened before him of withdrawing his security forces to the south where they could be put to work on the JVP. Moreover, India seemed willing to guarantee Jayewardene's sagging regime; significantly, just as the accords were announced, Indian frigates appeared off the coast at Colombo, well within helicopter range of the presidential palace. Their presence sent a very clear signal that anyone contemplating a coup would have to answer to Indian force.

Even so, the pact may have worsened Jayewardene's southern problems rather than solving them. From the beginning it was clear that the Indo-Lankan pact was not palatable to a Sinhalese population exposed to years of virulent anti-Indian propaganda, much of it stemming from state-owned media. Riots in Colombo showed widespread public anger among Sinhalese at the government for signing the pact, a mood that infected even the official state ceremonies. As Gandhi reviewed Sri Lanka's honor corps, a Sinhalese sailor struck the Indian leader in full view of a world television audience. Absent from the ceremonies were three senior ministers in Jayewardene's own government who had opposed the accords, the popular Prime Minister Ranasinghe Premadasa, Agriculture Minister Gamini Jayasuriya, and Defence Minister Lalith Athulathmudali.

By any measure of international diplomacy, it is curious that Gandhi would have agreed to such a pact without first making sure that Jayewardene had created a consensus for it. Speculation is rife in both Colombo and Delhi that Gandhi rushed into the pact unthinkingly as a short-term solution to his own political problems at home. Another, more cynical interpretation has it that New Delhi, realizing that Sri Lanka was sinking into an unpredictable political maelstrom, decided to prop up the one political organization that New Delhi could reasonably hope to control. This view suggests that with problems in the Punjab and Assam, not to mention its sour relations with China and Pakistan, India decided to take steps to control its southern flank before the situation got out of hand.

The Indian frigates could not protect President Jayewardene from an attempted assassination in August as he sat in a meeting within the tightly secured confines of Sri Jayewardenepura, the new parliamentary complex.

The president escaped injury, but one UNP official was killed and six others—including Premadasa and Athulathmudali—were injured. A previously unknown organization called the Patriotic People's Movement claimed responsibility for the attack, saying the Indo-Lankan pact was a "sellout to the Tamils." (Government spokesmen claim the organization is nothing more than a wing of the JVP.) No suspects in the attack could be found, confirming government suspicions that radical elements had infiltrated the government at every level. It is a measure of Colombo cynicism and political paranoia that some observers speculated the whole affair was a sham designed to buttress Jayewardene at the same time that it would eliminate the popular Premadasa and other opponents of the accord. This view borders on the ludicrous. It is, however, worth mentioning as an illustration of one of Sri Lanka's most severe political problems, namely, the precipitous decline of public trust in the government, and even more broadly, the sagging legitimacy of the island's political institutions. Such developments only serve to fuel the radicalism of youths, who see democracy as little more than an irresponsible playground for political corruption, scheming, subterfuge, and short-term expediency.

The Indian Peacekeeping Force (IPKF) in Jaffna soon encountered problems of their own. From the beginning it was obvious that the LTTE, which had acquiesced to the pact without approving it, was handing over only a token number of weapons. As the Indians waited patiently for the weapons, the Jaffna-based LTTE attacked two Eastern Province militant groups, the People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) and the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF), as leaders of the two groups were on their way to a "peace conference" with the LTTE. A round of attacks and counterattacks followed, leaving more than 150 dead. The conflict demonstrated the durability of a long-standing political rift between Jaffna Tamils and their Eastern Province counterparts who have long complained of the Jaffna penchant for trying to dominate Tamil political affairs. In the meantime, the LTTE demonstrated its opposition to the accord, and a Tamil militant, Thileepan, fasted to death in September at one of Jaffna's most important Hindu shrines, attracting huge crowds. Thileepan's death, resonating as it did with the belief of the credulous Tamil peasantry in the moral and spiritual merit of ascetic acts, gave the LTTE a huge propaganda victory. Thus emboldened, the LTTE took a hard line in subsequent Indian-sponsored negotiations over the composition of the interim provincial council. The talks broke down, much to the Indians' dismay.

The Indians were to encounter still more evidence that the Tigers had little intention of complying with the accord. Seventeen Tigers, armed to

the teeth in direct contravention of the pact, were apprehended in a boat just off the Jaffna coast. Among them was Pulendran, who was suspected of masterminding an Eastern Province slaughter of 120 Sinhalese bus passengers in April. The Indians decided, since these Tigers were illegally armed and therefore were violating the accords, to turn them over to Colombo. But all 17 swallowed the cyanide capsules that all LTTE soldiers wear around their necks; 12 died, including Pulendran. As reports of the suicides surfaced, the LTTE retaliated by killing eight Sri Lankan soldiers it was holding captive and assassinating three government officials. Attacks on Sinhalese civilian settlers in the Eastern Province were to follow; more than 180 Sinhalese died. The peacekeeping forces stood by in an apparent quandary as the slaughter mounted. In the south, opponents of the accord pointed to the violence as evidence that the Indians could not keep the peace.

In an abrupt about-face, the second of the year's bizarre twists, the Indians turned on the LTTE, the very group whose transition to power it was assumed the Indians would facilitate. Repeating the pattern of the Sri Lankan army's spring offensive, the Indian peacekeeping forces drove the Tigers up to Jaffna, where the LTTE dug into some very well-planned defenses. And it was here that the IPKF experienced the third surprise of the year: the strength of the LTTE. The Indian generals seem to have envisioned a quick roundup of the Tigers and a speedy end to the problem. Far from achieving quick results, however, the IPKF have become embroiled in a quagmire that has killed at least 250—and probably as many as 500—Indian soldiers and left more than one thousand of them wounded. Especially humiliating for the proud Indian army was the LTTE defeat of some of India's most highly-trained elite commando forces in hand-to-hand combat. Although the Indian forces regained control of much of the area formerly held by the militants, their main objective—capturing the ever-elusive LTTE leader, Prabhakaran—remained unfulfilled. The Tigers, meanwhile, melted into the population and slipped out of Jaffna, and despite the deaths of some 700 or 800 of them, they will regroup to fight again. There can be no purely military solution against the Tigers.

As the Tigers held off the Indian forces on the battlefield, criticism of the intervention mounted in India. Said one critic: "India's decision to go in for a military short-cut . . . could yet prove to be the biggest bungle in a situation where there have already been far too many."³ There is, however, another view. If the Tigers are really serious about the intentions

3. S. H. Venkatramani, "Tiger by the Tail," *India Today* (October 31, 1987), p. 35.

revealed to Penelope Willis, then it is hardly surprising that the IPKF would have turned on them. The Tigers themselves created the convenient impression that their murderous actions gave the Indians no choice, and New Delhi would doubtless have qualms about a group whose stated aim is to "export the revolution to Tamil Nadu." But one need not go so far as that; one look at the Tigers' political philosophy, which is as confused as it is unsophisticated, is enough to convince anyone—including the framers of policy in New Delhi—that the LTTE is too loose a cannon to roll about on so sensitive a deck. India has problems enough without a radical and uncontrollable regime taking possession of the harbor at Trincomalee, which India deems to be of enormous strategic significance. If this interpretation is correct, one can confidently predict that Indian troops will be in the north and east for some time. And that is precisely what concerns the more reflective of the Sinhalese opponents of the accord. They see it as the first step toward a Cyprus-style partition of the island, as India pursues its geopolitical ambitions without concern for Sri Lanka's needs.

The UNP nevertheless proceeds to implement the accord's provisions. After narrowly winning a Supreme Court ruling on the constitutionality of the Provincial Councils bill, a key element of the accord, the UNP government got the bill through Parliament—but not without cost. A bomb ripped through a crowded market in a Colombo suburb, killing 31, and a senior cabinet member, Gamini Jayasuriya, left the government rather than vote for the bill. The UNP MPs fear for their lives and do not dare return to their homes, many of which have, in any case, been burned to the ground by angry mobs. In December, only one week after Jayewardene vowed to wipe out those responsible for killing local UNP activists, Sinhalese extremists assassinated the chairman of the UNP on a Colombo street. And to add yet another twist to the murky and twisted emotional fabric of the conflict, some Sinhalese now take pride in the fury with which the Tigers have met the Indian offensive, as if the LTTE had suddenly become a courageous Sri Lankan force fighting the Indian aggressors.

Costs and Consequences

Evidence mounted in 1987 that the war, besides causing more than 7,000 deaths and displacing half a million people, is destroying the remarkable gains achieved by the UNP government's program of economic reforms, which was initiated ten years ago. From 1977 to 1982, Sri Lanka's economy grew at an average annual rate of 6.2%; unemployment was halved while inflation was cut nearly to zero. Finance Minister Ronnie de Mel estimated that 1987 economic growth would decline to only 3%, down from 4.3% last year, and that inflation—although still commendably

low—would rise. Government spending that could have been aimed at stimulating Sri Lanka's sluggish growth has been directed to military expenditures instead; indeed, out of a budget of Rs.65 billion, a ruinous 18% or Rs.12 billion was targeted for defense. To be sure, Sri Lanka's economic difficulties in 1987 were not caused solely by the war. The country encountered disastrous markets for its three main export crops of tea, rubber, and coconuts; prices hovered around (and often below) production costs. A severe drought obliged the government to spend millions on food imports.

In assessing the costs of the conflict, however, it must be noted that the ones that are difficult to quantify may be the most damaging in the long run. For instance, a World Bank mission assessed the damage caused by the ethnic conflict and public rioting following the Indo-Lankan accord at Rs.50 to 55 billion (US \$1.7 to 1.8 billion). Yet the long-term cost will be much higher, because the severe damage done to the country's industrial, transport, and communications infrastructure will hamstring reconstruction efforts. Among the indirect costs, moreover, is the disincentive to entrepreneurial activity caused not merely by insurgent activities but, more ominously, by a widespread breakdown in public order. Increasingly, Sri Lankans seem to conclude that violence will solve their problems. In times of civil disorder and rioting, for instance, a few middle-class Sinhalese businessmen and professionals seem to see the violence as a convenient context in which they can eliminate their rivals—whether Tamil, Sinhalese, or Muslim—with impunity. To feel secure in business in Sri Lanka today, one apparently needs political protection and a gang of thugs, as well as business acumen and capital. Foreign investors will be even more chary than indigenous entrepreneurs in such a situation, all the more so because capital-intensive projects are sitting ducks for militant attacks. In 1986 Tamil militants damaged a Trincomalee cement factory jointly owned by Japan's Mitsui Cement Co. and a group of Colombo investors; Mitsui refused to say in 1987 whether it would proceed with the needed repairs.

The conflict's price tag is nowhere so obvious as in the once-flourishing tourist trade. The once-popular resort hotels at Trincomalee, ringed around some of the world's loveliest beaches, now serve—if they still stand—as troop barracks. Tourist arrivals in 1986 (230,000) were down by 50% from the 1982 level, and the figure probably declined by an additional 50% in 1987. The tourist industry's image was not improved by the publication of a government commission's highly critical report of Air Lanka, Sri Lanka's national airline, which is said to have been grossly mismanaged. If the airline folds, the cost could be calamitous; by the end of

the year, many international carriers had ceased calling at the Colombo airport.

The political costs of the conflict may be even more staggering. Antigovernment sentiment, already strong, is exacerbated by the growing signs that Sri Lanka is becoming a police state, replete with armed security forces on street corners, security checks at government buildings, arrests and detentions of those suspected of subversive political activities, and extralegal operations carried out by security forces out of uniform. As anti-government (and anti-Indian) sentiment grows, increasing numbers of disaffected people may feel inclined to give the JVP a chance. Yet there are few signs that the radical left possesses the sophistication, political or otherwise, to rule effectively. As an Indian official said, commenting on the LTTE, "these guerrillas are people whose only sophistication in life is directed at pulling the trigger of a gun." Dominated by youths who see the game of politics-as-usual as nothing but an irresponsible and ruthless quest for political gain via political expediency, these groups—the JVP no less than the LTTE—view themselves as "revolutionaries" instead of "politicians." And for them, being a revolutionary means adopting a stance of rigid intransigence, coupled with an absolute refusal to compromise on anything. These are hardly the attitudes needed to solve Sri Lanka's problems. There is, indeed, widespread fear in Sri Lanka of a Pol Pot-style regime should these youths come to power. But unless Sri Lanka's aging political leadership can prove more effective in persuading youths that democracy is a better way of solving problems than violence, it is by no means impossible that the years to come will see a radical youth regime in Sri Lanka—or, to prevent it, a military coup. Either way, one cannot help but conclude that Sri Lanka's political system shows signs of terminal illness.